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ABSTRACT

The objective reporting of news is discussed in this paper as a moral obligation for professional journalists. Russian journalists' disparagement of objectivity is described briefly, and three basic assumptions to which journalists in the United States should subscribe are listed: (1) there is such a thing as objective reality, (2) that reality can be comprehended, and (3) the understanding of objective reality can be communicated. Arguments against the possibility of being objective and the contributions of social scientists to the journalism profession are discussed. Extensive quotes from journalist Walter Lippmann, references to sociologist Karl Mannheim's "Ideology and Utopia," and journalist William Hill's paraphrase of Lincoln's Gettysburg address are all offered in support of a theory of journalistic objectivity. (AEA)

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JOURNALISM'S HOLY GRAIL

The News Media's Quest for Objectivity

---A Forsaken Ideal?

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In one of life's little comi-coincidences, my wife and I celebrated the arrival of this, the bicentennial year of our country's declaration of independence, in--of all places--Moscow, where heady vodka flowed freely, and long into the next morning.

Come sunup--between 9:30 and 10 am, in Moscow, at that season--members of the crowd attending our party had drunk a toast to . . .

First, everything good that had happened--to anyone, during 1975.

Second, Comrade Breshnev, Comrade Kosygin, Comrade What's-His-Name, and a score of lesser Soviet functionaries, and

Third, everything good expected to happen--by anyone--this year, before it steals away into the frosted forests of Doctor Zhivagoland.

The festivities on Red Square, near our hotel, had reached such a state of euphoria, at one point, that several playful young Muscovites began throwing snowballs at Soviet soldiers changing the guard at Lenin's tomb.

Police in the square ran the teenagers down--playfully, of course--and escorted them off to the local whatever wherever one goes after being caught snowballing the guard at Lenin's tomb.

Good clean fun, all of it, welcoming the New Year and its eternal promise of better days for all of us.

"Snovum gordum," as those of us who can't speak Russian always say at a Moscow winter festival party.

Between toasts, some of us engaged in small talk about the ethics

of news reporting, freedom of the press, the proper role of the media of mass communications in today's complex organizational post-industrial society...and other appropriate topics of merriment.

It's always great fun, for me, talking with journalists from a Communist country.

Why?

Well, first, I love to argue.

So do they, I've learned. That's the second point.

The third point is this: throughout my own career, as a news reporter and editor, and now as a professor of journalism, I've been pursuing--Kingarthurianlegendlike---a Holy Grail, the ideal of Journalistic Objectivity.

A will o' the wisp. Myth? Fantasy? Mirage? Phantom of an ever-active imagination? Impossible dream?

Yes, my Soviet friends tell me, because the denial of journalistic objectivity, and the rejection of its pursuit, is the cornerstone of Communist ideology.

"All dissertations on 'objective and complete information are liberal hypocrisy," Lenin once observed. "The aim of information does not consist in commercializing the news, but in educating great masses..."

That aim, Lenin asserted, "will not be achieved by objective reports of events."

Since it is impossible to attain objectivity, in the opinion of Communist journalists, its pursuit is an exercise in futility.

Given that premise--a journalist cannot be objective, or neutral; but is pre-ordained to serve as a propaganda agent for one side or the

other--the only vital or relevant question becomes this:

Whose side is he--or she--on? Mine...ours? Or that of the enemy, perhaps?

I'm not suggesting, here, that anyone who believes that journalistic objectivity is a "myth" subscribes, in any way at all, to Communist theory.

On the contrary, some of our society's most loyal, devoted and dedicated defenders believe--sincerely, I assume--that it's impossible for a journalist to be objective.

Therefore, I am not going to assail the integrity, or question the loyalty, of those who ridicule our profession's continuing quest for objectivity. I never have.

Those who have never committed themselves to the pursuit of objectivity, and experienced the thrill of that pursuit, are honest.

Well-meaning they are, in their doctrinnaire faith in a simplistic absolution that governs an unchanging and changeless universe of semantic space.

They are naive, however.

Foolish, though obviously well-meaning.

Lacking in imagination, they are unable to comprehend the consequences that are certain to come should our profession abandon its constant crusade for more objectivity.

Although on the subject of academic objectivity and the role of the university, the following observations by Kingman Brewster, President of Yale University, are of comparable relevance to the ideal of journalistic objectivity:

> Cynical disparagement of objectivity as a myth seems to me both naive and irresponsible.
>
> Any claim of novelty to the observation that men are fallible at best, corruptible at worst, is naive.
>
> Its irresponsibility lies in the conclusion that, since the ideal is unattainable, it should not be held up as a standard to both practitioners and critics.

Well put, indeed.

With searing insight into its elemental reality, Kingman Brewster sees our ideal in all its pristine purity, and its incomparable beauty.

Beauty, purity, insight, objectivity...all exist in degrees. Failing to reach the highest degree--perfection--does not mean that anyone has failed to accomplish his or her essential mission, lost the battle, surrendered one's forces, or betrayed one's trust.

Honor, Duty, Country...

These are ideals. Ideals by which those dedicated to protecting the peace measure themselves, and their comrades. In journalism, the measure of a man, or woman, is by degrees of accuracy, fairness and objectivity.

Accuracy. Fairness. Objectivity.

Those are the watchwords of journalistic duty, devotion, dedication, heroism, at times.

We strive to be accurate, yet know we can never be 100 per cent

accurate. Fair, in the knowledge we can never be 100 per cent so. Objective. Honest. Sensitive. Responsible. Human. Responsive. Compassionate...et cetera---everything that a good scout, journalist, or true red-white-and blue Yankee-Doodle Dandy American ought to be nowadays.

Now, at this point, I need to acknowledge that the critics of journalistic objectivity have a ready answer to the logic that I've been expounding.

Objectivity is like pregnancy, they argue. There are no degrees of pregnancy. Phases or stages, perhaps, but not degrees. One is either pregnant, or not pregnant. Period.

So...one is either objective, or one is not. It's that simple, they argue.

Well, it's not that simple. Objectivity and pregnancy are not quite the same kinds of condition. For one thing, it's possible for a man to be objective--more or less--like a woman who's objective. But not pregnant--at least not at this point in medical history.

Also, if you'll permit me to play a bit more with the language, pregnancy is a most subjective state, unlike objectivity.

The nature of objectivity appears to me a bit more like the thing a Pennsylvania Dutch farmer had in mind as his son said goodbye to enter the service and be shipped to Fort Riley, Kansas, Junction City, and other terribly wicked places like it.

"If you find you can't be decent," the father told his son, "then be as decent as you can."

That man understood objectivity, it seems to me, whether he realized it or not.

For no virtue--individual virtue--exists in the absolute, or in

concrete reality.

Virtues are abstractions--relative things. Ideals to be pursued. Concepts to govern action. Standards, in the abstract, to apply as guides.

No one believes, does he or she, that we should abandon all our ideals--our efforts to be fair, and accurate, as journalists--because it's impossible for us to be 100 per cent accurate or fair?

Of course not.

That would be ridiculous, we all agree.

No more ridiculous, however, than abandoning our moral obligation to be objective--as objective as possible, given the human condition and its limitations.

In order to appreciate objectivity, as a crucial part of our human condition, let's look at the concept more closely.

According to the dictionary, objectivity is "the quality, state, or relation of being objective." Objective, in turn, is defined as "existing independent of mind."

Underlying those definitions, in an interesting manner, are the premises of dualistic philosophy.

We needn't go into an in-depth exploration of dualism, however, to appreciate the metaphysical assumptions that are made by news reporters and editors--journalists generally.

Every vocation or occupational calling relies upon certain basic assumptions about the nature of reality, the meaning of life, and so on. Journalism is no exception, obviously. We assume these things:

First, that there IS such a thing as objective reality, and subordinate realities, existing independent of our own individual existence.

Second, that such reality, or realities, can be comprehended--somehow--by a human mind.

Third, that comprehension or understanding of objective reality, or objective realities, can be communicated from one human mind to another.

ENTER THE REPORTER, the media of mass communication...the office of public affairs or infcrmation...the person engaged in the public intelligence of current events...our profession.

Now, at this point, it becomes readily apparent that when we talk about journalistic objectivity we're talking, really, about the degree to which a news report corresponds to objective reality--what really happened, in any news situation.

Is the reporter telling it "LIKE IT IS?"

Or has the reporter twisted the objective realities of the situation out of shape, in communicating an account of the event to others, to fit his or her preconceptions, biases, or prejudices--"principles" or "convictions" in polite terms?

Examining the metaphysical basis of journalistic objectivity, in this way, we expose the elemental fallacies that underlie the case against it.

Those who argue against journalistic objectivity have fallen into solipsism, an intellectual morass in which there is no knowable reality.

Only our imagination of it.

The solipsists of journalism are autistic thinkers, and have no business in our profession, really. Any more than someone who doesn't believe in the rule of law would belong in a courtroom, or someone who doesn't believe in scientific cause and effect in the practice of medicine.

Without solid and firm faith in the existence of objective reality, and the human mind's power to comprehend it and communicate that comprehension, journalism has no raison d'etre--no meaning, no relevance, no social ~~unity~~ utility.

I'm mystified, repeatedly, by how newspeople rejecting the idea of journalistic objectivity insist that other people be objective.

No judge or jury are 100 per cent objective, we know. Yet we expect a judge or jury, the courts, generally, to be objective to a considerable degree, at least.

No college professor, or teacher, can be 100 percent objective, we know, but we expect him or her--the educational system, in general--to be as objective as possible, in grading, evaluating, and certifying people engaged in learning at all levels.

No official of government can be 100 percent objective, we know, yet we expect--demand, rather--that bureaucrats curb their prejudices in the execution of official duties.

Is it unreasonable, then, for the public to demand a comparable objectivity from journalists? Surely we are made of as stern a stuff as government bureaucrats, teachers, and judges, and can therefore be depended upon to control our biases to the same degree.

What would I do, as a journalist, should some judge, educator, or

government official take this position:

"I can't be 100 percent objective about this thing, sir, so it's silly for me to try to be objective at all."

I'd expose him, that's what I'd do, and demand that he be removed from office--probably.

Given democratic society's historic and traditional commitment to the bureaucratic model or ideal of objectivity, and to scientific method, is it any wonder that the reform of our profession and its partisan press of primitive days devoted itself, mostly, to the quest for journalistic objectivity?

Reviewing the evolution of modern newspapers, we find this description and admonition:

> Its primary office is the gathering of news. At the peril of its soul it must see that the supply is not tainted. Neither in what is gives, nor in what it does not give, nor in the mode of presentation, must the unclouded face of truth suffer wrong. Comment is free but facts are sacred.

Such deep commitment to our constant crusade against the pollution of truth leads, inevitably, to the elevation of journalistic objectivity as an ultimate ideal.

Discussing the rule of objectivity, as modern journalism's basic tenet, Walter Lippmann once made this observation:

> It encourages not only the energetic reporting of facts but also the honest search for the truth to which those facts belong. It imposes restraints upon owners and editors. It authorizes resistance--indeed, in honor it calls for resistance--

to the contamination of the news by special prejudices and by special interests. It proclaims the corporate opposition of our whole profession to the prostitution of the press by political parties, by political, economic, and ideological pressure groups, by social climbers, and by adventurers on the make.

The function of journalistic objectivity, Lippmann observed at another point in his career, is basic to the true understanding of public affairs:

"As our minds become more deeply aware of their own subjectivism," Lippmann pointed out, "we find a zest in objective method that is not otherwise there. We see vividly, as normally we should not, the enormous mischief and casual cruelty of our prejudices. And the destruction of a prejudice, though painful at first, because of its connection with our self-respect, gives an immense relief and a fine pride when it is successfully done. There is a radical enlargement of the range of attention. As the current categories dissolve, a hard, simple version of the world breaks up. The scene turns vivid and full. There follows an emotional incentive to hearty appreciation of scientific method, which otherwise it is not easy to arouse, and is impossible to sustain. Prejudices are so much easier and more interesting. For if you teach the principles of science as if they had always been accepted, their chief virtue as a discipline, which is objectivity, will make them dull. But teach them at first as victories over the superstitions of the mind, and the exhilaration of the chase and of the conquest may carry the pupil over that hard transition from his own self-bound experience to the phase where his curiosity has matured, and his reason has acquired passion."

It's unfortunate, really, that Lippmann never became a professor of journalism, for more of his kind of searing insight and searing idealism have always been needed in the academic community.

After the elementary writing skills and capabilities for basic fact-gathering have been developed, we have discovered in education for journalism, the central problem in achieving genuine professional competence becomes that of cultivating one's objectivity.

The problem of objectivity will always be the crucial one. For unless a journalist can call upon his own variety of background, breadth of education, mind-opening kind of training, diversification of experience, and an extensive range of perspectives represented in the collective organization of his communications medium to make a superior degree of objectivity apparent in his work, then he has no legitimate claim to society's trust and confidence.

Many will agrue that the preceding statement is not true. Perhaps it isn't adequate as a natural history type description of journalism in our day, but it's a logical expression of the general normative theory which most journalists use in their evaluation of professional performance--the performance of other journalists, at least.

Most journalists in the United States profess to believe in the ideal of journalistic objectivity. A newspaper or any other medium of such communication should report the news in an objective, impartial, unbiased, unprejudiced manner, according to the ideal, and such media should serve as benchmarks of factual truth in the discourse of public affairs. That is the ideology which prevails in journalism today, at least as far as its standard profession of faith is concerned.

Perhaps never having read Karl Mannheim's "Ideology and Utopia," some professors of journalism are compromising that fundamental faith, however. Perfect objectivity will always elude us, they point out, because it is impossible. Even the most dedicated among us has to agree on that point, but at that point our paths part.

Having discovered that they are not supermen, members of the disillusioned minority among us have started a reactionary movement that threatens to divide the profession at a most critical point in its progress toward true professionalism.

Unless the faithful corps of real professionals can be strengthened and encouraged to continue its quest for more objectivity, American news media--the best on earth, despite their faults--could degenerate into political journals and propaganda organs like those in continental Europe.

In the reaction provoked by its superficial reading of relativistic thought, the minority among us gets occasional encouragement from a social scientist.

Under the influence of inherited thought that doesn't fit journalistic fact today, some political scientists and sociologists tend to equate the exercise of freedom of speech and expression generally with that of the press. Except for editorializing, there is no common denominator of meaningful comparison between such functions. On the contrary, the two derivative purposes are opposites in an important sense. The purpose of free speech and other "agitative" liberties is to facilitate the development of interaction between ideologies: the purpose of journalism, as a profession, is to provide solid benchmarks or reliable points of

reference for comparing or reconciling thought patterns to the facts, and in measuring the epistemic correlation of theories.

In a patronizing manner that pleases unprofessional journalists but infuriates the real professionals, a social scientist occasionally will praise the news media as indispensable agents in the political dialogue essential to a democratic society. Even though people can't be objective, really, and tend to be quite partisan at times, they are nevertheless important in stimulating trade in that marvelous (though fictitious) open market place of ideas. Newspeople should therefore be tolerated--cherished, perhaps.

The professional journalist doesn't want to be tolerated, or even cherished. He or she has no desire to be some sort of glorified opinion-monger. No. The professional journalist wants to be respected; and for this good reason: the superior objectivity which he or she brings to bear in giving the public its intelligence of current events.

If the preceding sounds hyper-critical of certain social scientists, it should be noted that any expert may appear terribly naive when he ventures into another profession's field of operation.

The social scientist can teach the journalist countless things; but little about journalism as a profession. The professional journalist, in turn, can teach the social scientist; but nothing about social science as such.

Studies in social science have done much to improve the profession of journalism. Through the application of findings from the field of communications research, journalists are upgrading their performance steadily, and analytical insights paying additional dividends in the future

can be anticipated from the continued development of the sociology of knowledge as a sub-discipline in the social sciences.

The sociology of knowledge and communications research represent two styles of approach to the same subject matter, as Kurt Wolff points out. Through imaginative integration of the two approaches, a more mature ideology and more comprehensive normative theory will be formulated, it is hoped, to guide journalism into more productive and effective service.

The most favorable locale for such theory construction, of course, is the campus of a university; and the relationship between journalism and the social sciences reaches its sharpest focus in education for journalism. For example, since leaving professional journalism to teach at a university, I have been forced to think much more often and more deeply about its problems--that of objectivity, especially.

At first, I became alarmed. Some journalism students appeared unimpressed by arguments in favor of cultivating the maximum amount of objectivity toward a news evevt. In the excitement of their discovering that complete objectivity was impossible, they appeared to have given up the struggle to achieve even a decent degree.

Since it isn't possible to be unbiased, really, why waste one's time trying? That's their attitude. Why not admit one's biases to one's readers and then go about employing one's captive medium of communication as an instrument of needed social change? When one has such sincere and strong opinions, why should a journalist permit a futile striving for

perfection to frustrate him and inhibit his playing the role of ideologue?

It's unfair competition in the market place of ideas? So what?

Because of such ideas expressed by some students, I began to think that our entire educational system might be on the brink of destruction by relativism. Glancing around academe, and getting better acquainted with some of my colleagues, I began to wonder if the modern university wasn't an intellectual jungle. In their teaching, some professors appeared to be giving their students the idea that one man's opinion is just as good as another's. Since there appeared to be no objective standards, students were being encouraged to just think--to think about anything, in any way. It didn't matter how well one thought, just so he thought.

In my own now redoubled search for greater objectivity, I am most grateful to Karl Mannheim.

Mannheim's sociology of knowledge has given me a new appreciation of our most important problem in journalism. No student should be admitted to our profession in future years without having been exposed to Mannheim's general theory.

"A new kind of objectivity...is attainable not through the exclusion of evaluations but through the critical awareness and control of them."

In that statement from Mannheim's book, it seems to me, can be found the basis for an improved approach to journalistic practice.

In the past, the journalist has tried to remain aloof, detached and remote from the subjective substance of his inquiry. At the same time, his function required a detailed knowledge of the subject's empirical fact. Forced into such a paradoxical position, the not so tough-minded often becomes confused.

In reading Mannheim's book, the journalist becomes aware of his own preconceptions--the strong deterministic influence of an arrested form of the liberal-humanitarian utopia on our concept of journalism's function in society, for example.

In addition, the journalist is able to recognize the logical fault that underlies the libertarian concept of the press. It is an unmasking of the ideology which prevails in modern government without a corresponding recognition that our own concept of the government's designs on freedom of the press are determined by social conditions.

The realization that our definition of news itself is one dictated by experience and environment is a sobering one, and the thought is beginning to haunt journalism daily, as it should.

Thrown back upon itself, in Mannheim's terms, the profession of journalism might be tempted to question its traditional function today, and to doubt its purpose. The solution of our most crucial problem is not, however, in denying its existence, in minimizing its importance, or abandoning our efforts to solve it. Neither is the answer in abdicating our office. The acknowledgement that every man's thought has been conditioned by his past and its social context, the recognition that every man has his biases and prejudices, and the admission that every man is incapable of complete objectivity are not sufficient cause for surrendering our ideal. Our ideology will need to be changed, but not abandoned.

Although we have several limitations, objectivity will always be possible to a significant degree--perhaps a pivotal degree--in journalism. If we explore the implications of Mannheim's "relationalism" theory, applying it to our practice, we should be able to better detect our own

biases, to balance them with differing perspectives solicited from others, and to obtain a more objective social consensus concerning the "facts" of any news event.

In order to foster more journalistic objectivity, we need to broaden the range of backgrounds from which the members of our profession are recruited, enlarge the scope of their education, toughen the self-examination and self-criticism aspects of their training, teach them the investigative skills they will need to ferret out the numerous "angles" in any news event, require them to "walk all the way around" each occurrence, challenge their conclusions constantly, encourage them to exploit as thoroughly as possible every resource possessed by a news-gathering and reporting organization for increasing the variety of viewpoints available in any given situation, and direct them in action designed to stimulate them to think more objectively.

Most important of all, perhaps, we must instill in our ranks a sharper skepticism, especially toward those who say there are no objective standards for determining empirical fact, and a deeper commitment to each person's personal quest for more objectivity.

We need to promote the development of objectivity as a more demanding ideology within our profession; to nourish the social roots of our concepts commanding the effort at objectivity.

The social context and conditions that broaden perspective, breed second thoughts and nurse the tentative temperament need to be protected, strengthened and expanded throughout the journalistic establishment.

The highest possible degree of objectivity, in journalism, depends upon superior intelligence, creativity, imagination, learning--and humility, great humility.

Given these attributes, in liberal amounts, any newsperson is bound to achieve--unconsciously, almost--more and more objectivity as he or she acquires more experience.

However, motivation is important, too.

For that reason, and because only a massive infusion of new devotion to the ideal of objectivity will salvage our profession's credibility at this pivotal point in history, we need to revive the spirit of reform that gave birth to that ideal.

In a moment of journalistic levity, William Hill once converted Lincoln's Gettysburg address into a plea for such rededication.

"Nine score and five years ago," Hill wrote, "our forefathers brought forth upon this continent the daily newspaper, conceived in objectivity and dedicated to the proposition that all men are entitled to impartial facts.

"Now we are engaged in a great media debate," Hill observed, "testing whether the newspaper, or any medium so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met in a great forum for that debate. We are here to consider the repeated charge that men have been foolish to devote their lives to gathering and publishing facts. It is not only fitting and proper but necessary that we should do this.

"But in a larger sense, we cannot acclaim, we cannot celebrate, we cannot eulogize objectivity. The wise men, living and dead, who have struggled to keep emotion, surmise and personal prejudice out of the news columns have glorified objectivity far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember current self-serving attacks on objective reporting for it can never forget that news columns deserve facts and not partisan propaganda. It is for us, as

newsmen, to be dedicated to the great task remaining before us, that from the greatness of our heritage we resolve to make short shrift of those who deny even the existence of objectivity, that we here highly resolve that impartial reporting will continue with all honor--that objectivity, as a high ideal, shall have a new birth of acceptance and that fairness in our news columns, by our news columns and for our news columns, shall not perish from the earth."

I don't know what Abe Lincoln would say about Bill Hill's adaptation of his address, were the Great Emancipator alive today, but history makes it abundantly clear, in many ways, that Lincoln thought journalists should be objective--when they didn't agree with him, at least.

Which brings up an interesting aspect of this issue. Every cub reporter has noted, I'm sure, that if the news source to whom he's talking finds out that he or she--the reporter--approves of what's being done--then the news source will inevitably urge the reporter to be more "interpretative" in his or her reporting.

On the other hand, if the news source realizes that the reporter is hostile, more or less, the news source usually will assert his or her "right" to objective treatment.

Built into our social contract with the rest of society, it seems to me, is the right of everyone to have his or her news reported objectively.

The person forced, by circumstances, to throw himself or herself on the mercy of our typewriters has a right to be protected from journalistic brutality, whether slanted coverage or outright character assassination.

The reporting of news as objectively as possible is not ours to do--or not do--as we may please. It is neither a special privilege nor professional conceit. It is not a rule of conduct that we are free to rescind, unilaterally.

No. The objective reporting of news is a moral obligation inherent in the nature of democratic government.

For democracy will not work, cannot work, without the objective reporting of public affairs--daily, faithfully, and in high fidelity.

We have no choice, really, when it comes to continuing our profession's pursuit of journalism's Holy Grail.

Capture it, caress its bejewelled radiance, cherish if in all reality we will never be able to do.

But pursue it we must, intelligently, bravely, and relentlessly, for the only alternative is an unacceptable one: the betrayal of a sacred trust. That trust--our charge--is the same as the oath taken by a witness called into court to testify at a trial: to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing <u>but</u> the truth.

To tell the <u>truth</u>, that, in our case, is accurate factual reporting.

The <u>whole</u> truth, that's interpretative reporting--reporting that brings out <u>all</u> the facts needed for fairness to all involved in the news.

And nothing <u>but</u> the truth--that's objective reporting--journalistic objectivity, pure and simple.

Again,

Accuracy--

Fairness--

Objectivity.

Keep the faith and the best of everything always, in the most satisfying of all professions--the pursuit of objective reality in the service of truth.

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